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Emile Cammaerts

ÉMILE CAMMAERTS

Chants Patriotiques et Autres Poèmes and *Les Trois Rois et Autres Poèmes*, by Émile Cammaerts; English translations by Tita Brand-Cammaerts. John Lane, London.

Belgium comes out of her brave fight wearing her wounds as flowers and with songs leaping to her lips. Of her band of war poets one of the most conspicuous is Émile Cammaerts, whose portrait shows a strong face with a young brow, yet, though he is but little past forty, the beard of an old man. He was born and educated in Brussels, served as professor of geography at the *Institut Commercial* of Mons, and since 1908 has been living in England and devoting himself to his pen. In 1916 he published the *Chants Patriotiques*, which is largely poems written before the war. As the proceeds of the first edition were to be given to the Belgian Soldiers' Fund for the purchase of tobacco, the book opens with a song of great charm, called *Pour la Pipe du Soldat*. *Les Trois Rois et Autres Poèmes*, which is entirely war poetry, followed hard upon the other volume.

Except for four poems, Mr. Cammaerts' translator is his wife, the books being printed with poem and translation on opposite pages. Though the translator has brought an eager conscience to her task, it would be better to forego these poems entirely rather than be misled by the English versions, which give none of the flavor, none of the spontaneity, of the original. Not disdaining rhyme and meter, Cammaerts is thoroughly modern; watchful for the word too many, scorn-

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ful of what is hackneyed. The translator's style is traditional to awkwardness, so she makes the poet express himself in English in the very manner he would avoid in French. Poems full of subtle charm and individual beauty become in English commonplace, the thought being checked in its flow by the stiffness of its clothing. Of the four translations by other hands, those by Lord Curzon, Alfred Percival Graves and Angela Beyer are excellent.

Cammaerts' earlier poems make a strong appeal—poems of love, of children, of nature; all written at a time when Belgium was at one with all the world. With a stroke of art he can transport us to a little house set in a garden still bright with blooming trees and flowers—yet a house faded, gray with dust, heavy with silence—and make us know that love has lived in it. He is always natural, always simple, and a clear religious belief runs through all he writes.

But he has achieved distinction chiefly through his war poems. Beautiful as hope and love he can make hatred and vengeance. An instance of his implacable hate is found in *Après Anvers*, a stirring thing which has been set to music by Elgar. *Au Grand Roi d'un Petit Pays* does tender homage to Belgium's king. I do not know which is the most touching picture—that of a peasant girl who prefers death to leaving her own home and to whose voice Cammaerts has given exquisite lyrics, or that of a little Virgin of porcelain smiling up from a deserted grave near Ramscapelle, or the colorful one of an Easter day in Belgium during the war.

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Les Trois Rois, the titular poem of the second book, is perhaps the least important of the war poems. It is in the form of a drama, and deals with Satan and his servant the German emperor, with Michael, Gabriel, Raphaël, etc., Mary and the Christchild. *A ma Patrie Enchaînée* is a bitter contrast of fruitful countrysides and joyful days, with devastated fields and towns, and bruised hands stretched out gropingly in the night. Only a stoic could read without tears *Une Confession*, and *La Neige* with its beauty and its terrific import.

Le Dernier Boche is a dream of hate which finds its climax in these, its last lines:

Qu'importe!
Pourvu qu'il nous soit donné de voir,
Du seuil de notre porte—
Tandis que les cloches
Sonneront l'hallali—
Le dos gris
Du dernier Boche.

And *Le Tir National* is a burst of ironic fury directed against the enemy, written in memory of Edith Cavell.

Cammaerts has a power found oftener in French poetry than in English—he can take an ancient nursery rhyme as motive and build around it all the environment of a modern tale. An instance of this is his *Frère Jacques*; the old tune beats out its childish accompaniment in our heads as we read the poet's lines. Here we have the story of a soldier who in ordinary life was a trappist monk:

Frère Jacques, frère Jacques,
Dormez-vous? dormez-vous?

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Yes, he sleeps, in his white bed in the white monastery,
as the golden sun comes up over a smiling country and the
time to ring matins draws near.

Frère Jacques, frère Jacques,
Dormez-vous? dormez-vous?

No, he does not sleep now. He is the army's look-out man.
For three days the cannonade has isolated him from the
trenches, and the stars look through the roof of his grim
loft to the Yser. He is cold, hungry, thirsty, but he never
loses his grip on the telephone. We can hear his prayers
mingle with his directions: "Fifty yards to the right . . .
Thank Thee, God, for . . . Prepare the searchlight . . .
O God, remember our wives, our little ones . . . now
ready . . . fire!" Then, after a thundering explosion of
shell, arises the insistent refrain:

Sonnez les matines, sonnez les matines!
Bim, bam, boum! Bim, bam, boum!

It is difficult to find a poem brief enough to quote that
shows characteristically Cammaerts' spirit and his lyric
manner. Perhaps *L'Amour de la Patrie* will do it:

C'est l'accent d'une voix,
Le son d'une cloche lointaine,
Une clairière dans les bois,
Un coup de soleil sur la plaine.
C'est un certain toit, sous un certain ciel,
Et le parfum de la poussière dans la rue.
C'est une ferme à genoux devant une chapelle,
Au bord d'un chemin, où larmoient quelques cierges.
C'est la senteur des herbes, à l'entour des étangs,
Et le parfum de la poussière dans la rue.
C'est l'éclat d'un regard, la gaucherie d'un mouvement,
Une vision du passé aussitôt disparue . . .

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C'est tout ce qu'on ne peut pas dire
Et tout ce qu'on sent,
Tout ce qu'on ne peut traduire
Qu'en le chantant.

C'est ce qu'on mange et ce qu'on voit,
Ce qu'on respire, ce qu'on entend.
C'est le goût du pain et du tabac,
L'éclat des feuilles, l'odeur du vent
Et les bruits familiers du village:
Les chiens qui aboient, les gens qui s'appellent,
Et le joyeux tapage
Des verres sous la tonnelle . . .
C'est tout ce qu'on ne peut pas dire
Et tout ce qu'on sent,
Tout ce qu'on ne peut traduire,
Qu'en le chantant.

C'est le meilleur de notre corps
Et le plus pur de notre sang,
C'est ce qui nous rappelle nos morts
Et nous fait souhaiter nos enfants.
C'est la couleur de notre vie
Et la saveur de nos chansons,
C'est la douce folie
De récolter ce qu'on sème,
Et l'absurde passion
De posséder ce qu'on aime . . .
C'est tout ce qu'on ne peut pas dire
Et tout ce qu'on sent,
Tout ce qu'on ne peut traduire
Qu'en le chantant.

Agnes Lee

NOTES

Sherwood Anderson, of Chicago, who appears for the first time in POETRY, is already rather widely known as a novelist and short story writer. He has only recently turned to the writing of poetry, and so far as we know has appeared as a poet only in *Others*. His novels like his poetry are typically American in spirit.